The Past and Future of Iraq

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The Past and Future of Iraq

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Introduction

Since the 1950s, the Marine Corps has played an increasing role in the national strategy of preserving peace as part of nation building operations. While these operations have ranged from expeditionary forces conducting security for local U.S. embassies to peace making and peace keeping operations, the Marine Corps currently faces its largest deployment as peace makers/peace keepers since the American presence in 1980s Beirut, Lebanon. In that operation, 241 Marines died in a terrorist bombing of the Marine Amphibious Unit headquarters due to a failure to understand the culture in which they were operating. While not completely analogous, Lebanon provides many useful lessons for today's Marines in Iraq. Therefore, in order to deal with the Iraqi insurgency, the USMC must understand Iraqi cultural influences, recognize local power bases and maintain a balanced position of strength, compassion and equality.

Middle East Trends

Marine operations in the Middle East confront numerous difficulties. Chief among these is that many of the countries are constructs of post-World War I mandates, which created geographic and political states that lack any

sense of national identity.[1] Second, while Islam is the largest unifying element of the Middle East population, it does not add to national identity, but rather to a pan-Arabian Islamic identity that crosses national boundaries. Therefore, in order to attempt to operate within this environment, Marine leaders must understand the social and political culture of the population occupying it.

Iraq Past

Over 6000 years ago, civilization took root in the bountiful farmlands located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. For centuries, various groups vied for control of this region with varying degrees of success. Perhaps the most long-lasting and memorable are the Mesopotamians, who, under the leadership of Kings Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar, developed influential societies. Throughout Iraq's ancient history, invading northern tribes, Greeks, Assyrians, and Acadians came into contact with Arabic Bedouins.[2] As author Sandra Mackey states, this "chaotic succession of mini-states and empires refuses to conform to constant boundaries or a neat story line."[3] It is this pattern of the "triumph of cultural achievement juxtaposed against power and carnage" that continues to

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[1] Sandra Mackey, *The Reckoning: Iraq and the Legacy of Saddam Hussein* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 28, 56.
[2] Mackey, 33.
[3] Mackey, 33.

define Iraq today where the friction between cultures and societies remains sharp.[4]

The introduction of Islam into Iraq did even more to divide the society than to unify it because shortly after Islam's introduction into the Arabian world as a unifying force, it split into internally warring sects, Sunni and Shia. This religious split created social and cultural divisions as well, divisions that were still existent when the British attempted to establish a "modern" Iraq in 1920. In Iraq, Sunni Muslims are the minority population group yet they were Iraq's ruling class, and they benefited from Saddam Hussein's system of patronage.

Iraq Present

Modern Iraq is defined by its history since the 1958 coup d'état that led to Saddam Hussein's rise to power. As author Toby Dodge summarizes, throughout his thirty-odd years as "president," Saddam's Baath regime of Sunni Muslims "used extreme levels of violence and the powers of patronage delivered by oil wealth to co-opt or break any independent vestiges of civil society."[5]

Operating primarily from the Sunni triangle, an area in the center of the country, Saddam Hussein's political

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[4] Mackey, 33.
5 Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 159.

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party of Baathist Sunni Muslims enjoyed relative privilege

within a totalitarian socialist state. Conversely, the

southern portion of the country consists largely of Shia

Muslims who were often the victims of Baathist control and

persecution, particularly after the failed 1991 uprising.

Iraq Future

Iraq's future is both bleak and optimistic. On the

bleak side, the United States has pledged to create a

democratic society within a country that is devoid of

democratic tradition and has only known oppressive,

despotic rule, often by a minority population group.

Furthermore, the various insurgents have divergent ultimate

goals ranging from restoring a status quo ante bellum to

the development of an Iraq governed as an Islamist state

similar to Iran. However, as Naval War College professor

Dr. Hashim points out,

> The insurgents have a series of goals that can be
> described as "negative" ones that are defined by what
> they do not want – i.e. the U.S. presence;
> "reactionary" ones that seek the return of the old
> order; or gut and nationalist reaction to humiliation
> and domination by the Other. There is no "positive"
> goal(s) that is either an articulation of what they do
> want or a vision of the future.[6]

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[6] Ahmed S. Hashim, PhD. *The Sunni Insurgency In Iraq,*
http://www.mideasti.org/articles/doc89.html

On the opposite side, the majority population group within Iraq, the Shia Muslims have a tradition of patience. As Dr. Hashim explains,

> Having been disempowered for much of their history, Shi'is have learned to calculate prudently the correlation of forces between them and the powers that be, to develop their own parallel social and political networks, and to be more patient in formulating a response to perceived oppression.[7]

A piece of good news is that American forces increasingly understand the need for increased cultural awareness.

Dangers

First, the United States must avoid adopting policies similar to 1920s British efforts and even those of Saddam in selecting perceived leaders (tribal and religious leaders) and then using extreme violence to ensure their positions. The basic problem with this is that Saddam Hussein's infiltration of the tribal society and religious schools through patronage and intimidation means that the society at large would reject most of those individuals.[8] While local Marine commanders lack the ability to control higher-level decisions, understanding the effect of those decisions is critical.

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[7] Ahmed S. Hashim, PhD. *The Sunni Insurgency In Iraq,* http://www.mideasti.org/articles/doc89.html
[8] Dodge, 159-163.

Second, as author Sandra Mackey points out, "bitter memories of abandonment of the Shia and Kurdish uprisings of 1991 and isolation and impoverishment [due to U.N. sanctions] over more than a decade . . ." leaves the United States Marines open to "a secular version of militant Islam."[9] Local commanders will have to exercise great care and caution to bolster local community relations to assuage any resentment.

Sunni Muslim Iraqi represent both the minority population group and the former benefactors of Saddam Hussein's patronage programs, so they have the most to lose from any further change in the status quo. Add to this group foreign Islamist extremists, and the U.S. faces a large portion of the population that is focused in the short term on the violent disruption of long-term U.S. goals. Adding to this problem is the improbability of the average Iraqi to intervene or become involved. In the 1991 uprisings in southern Iraq, a large segment of the Iraqi rural population did not intervene on either side of the revolt, preferring to wait and see who won rather than risk siding with the loser.[10]

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[9] Mackey, 395.
[10] Dodge, 162.

Solutions

The type of pre-deployment training USMC units are currently undergoing is the type of proactive approach necessary for continued operations in Iraq. As mentioned previously, the pre-deployment cultural training USMC units undergo prior to deployment provides the best hope for success. While not a panacea of cure, and potentially too much ill has already occurred, the Marine Corps would make a critical error to do less than it does today. The language training, although basic, and cultural (to include religious) awareness training provided to deploying Marines are indispensable.

In addition, the emphasis placed by Major General Mattis' on a revival of the *Small Wars Manual* is a positive signal that Marine Corps leadership understands that in countering insurgency, the physical response is not always the most productive.

The more problematic issue for Marines operating in Iraq is in avoiding their biggest obstacle to success. If the Marine Corps on a local scale (or the United States on a larger scale) selects Iraqi leaders who are not acceptable to the population at large, they stand to repeat the system of illegitimate leadership and patronage that Saddam Hussein used. Moreover, the U.S. risks using

military force to support illegitimate leaders as occurred in the 1920s British failure. To do so invites the same probability of failure.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps must pin its hope for success on drawing on a legacy of countering small-scale insurgencies with a balance of strength, compassion and equality. While the Marine Corps operates as an armed instrument of American foreign policy, it cannot simply enforce American will by force of arms alone. Only by understanding Iraqi cultural influences, recognizing the local power bases respected by Iraqis and maintaining a balanced position of strength, compassion and equality will any hope exist for American success in Iraq.

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